A Leadership Journey:
Personal Reflections from the School of Hard Knocks

R. Scott Pochron

Abstract: The following paper chronicles the evolution of the author's thinking on leadership through the course of his work experience. Leadership is viewed as a dynamical process involving both formal and informal roles. The process is initiated as an individual identifies opportunities and feels pulled to respond to emerging patterns and initiate action to enable positive change. The dynamics between formal and informal leadership structures and leadership as a state of mind are discussed.

Key words: Adversity, complexity, fundamental state of leadership, leadership, requisite organization, self transcending construction.

The following paper presents a reflection on my personal journey and evolving understanding of leadership based on my work experience over the past 17 years. As I look back on the time, I recognize that much of my current interest in leadership and complexity has evolved from crises that have I have confronted and attempted to overcome. This paper chronicles the development of my thinking on leadership.

Stages in the Journey

Through my career I have seen various touch points that have shaped and influenced my perspectives on leadership. Fundamentally I have experienced my role as a leader as one who articulates and puts into action a vision for a future that inspires others to join in … at least to a point. Frequently along the way it has been the disequilibrium of resistance to that vision that has been the greatest influence on reshaping my focus and thinking about leadership, as I've struggled to overcome obstacles. I have come to see leadership as a dynamical distributed process among actors.

There are some fundamental principles that have driven my beliefs about leadership as a process. In this regard, I believe I have adopted an informal methodology akin to grounded theory, as I take in information about an area of concern, formulate a theory about how to address it and then test and modify that theory through active engagement. Frequently I have found that additional learning (through books read on the subject of inquiry) have supplemented the theorizing process, and not inconsistent with grounded theory methodology where review of the literature often occurs after initial data and theorizing has started (McGhee et al. 2007).

There have been peak events through my career that have shaped my perspectives on leadership. However, the past eight years working for a large multinational company have served as the informal laboratory for the development of my thinking that has lead to my current graduate studies in Leadership Dynamics.

I recall the bittersweet excitement of joining the company. I had been employed as CIO for a smaller publicly traded company that was subsequently acquired by the larger multinational company (about 60,000 employees globally). I had worked through the emotional transition as operations were shut down and transferred to new corporate headquarters. Of the 150 employees in the company, only about 10 of us were offered permanent positions and relocated.[1]

My new position in the acquiring company was, in my opinion, a dream job – devising a long-term strategy for the growth of a key business unit from a process and technology perspective. I quickly noted operational problems and developed recommendations to address them. However, my dream was quickly shattered as I soon realized that what I was hired to do and the willingness of the management team to embrace new ideas were not necessarily aligned. Over the past eight years, I have watched as the company has grown substantially – largely through acquisition – and yet somehow continued to suffer from the same challenges I noted when I first joined.

Organization as Organism

My first day at work with the new company, I was struck by the tyranny of meetings that absorbed so much time there was no time left to do work. Employees were frustrated because they did not have access to their managers for direction. Projects were not being completed in a timely manner because the subject matter experts needed on them were double or triple booked and unavailable. Organizational beliefs about collaboration required all key employees that were stakeholders to a project participate in discussion and decision making. Yet, decision making was an extremely slow process as there was no clarity (with the exception of a handful of senior executives) as to who had decision making authority. Very often a meeting would be called to make a decision. A group would gather and discuss the issue, but because one key person was not present (double booked in another meeting!) the decision could not be finalized. So another meeting would be called and on and on it went as a never ending caucus-race.

While I was brought into a company as a change agent and explicitly tasked to bring strategic change to the business unit to which I was assigned, I quickly realized that this was not truly the case. Interest in change was driven solely by the immediate short term demands of specific clients, executives or what did not significantly impact the status quo. At this time I managed a team responsible for coordinating technology related projects for the business unit; I also reported to the Executive Vice President of the business unit. At one point I had a lengthy conversation with him about problems in the way we were working with the larger IT department. That conversation ultimately resulted in a reorganization in which a new VP of IT was brought in, the team that reported to me was passed on to someone else, and I was to report to this new boss as an independent contributor.

This transition was an extremely difficult period for me, yet significant in shaping my views of leadership. First, I went through a season of deep self searching as I worked through the shift from manager to independent contributor. This was a period of deep reflection on my sense of identity, my values, and sense of personal integrity. I interpreted this transition as the system

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1 I will speak more about what I learned from this difficult transition in a later section.

self-organizing and engaging a new way of addressing IT within the business unit (a significant process improvement), however the reorganization left me in a shadow role to what I was originally tasked to do. A new major acquisition had just been signed and the focus of the whole company had shifted from future strategy to short term integration. After about six months in this position, I moved out of the business unit to work in a new role within the larger parent company.

Leadership is largely about exerting influence in a manner that encourages others to follow to a desired outcome. Various authors have come up with definitions along the way. My favorite remains Sun Tzu in the *Art of War*: "The way [of leadership] means inducing the people to have the same aim as the leadership, so that they will share death and share life, without fear of danger" (Sun Tzu, 2005, p.43). For Sun Tzu, leadership was about strategy, relationships, and a dynamic that aligned a shared vision that might also call on those so aligned to take action that may transcend personal self interest; the definition also recognizes the collaborative dynamic that leader and follower share in participating in this vision – both share the benefits and risks in its pursuit.

Understanding this inner dynamic of shared vision was also consistent with other schools of thought that I had aligned with. Senge's works (1990; 1994; 1999) on learning organization theory reinforced the need for personal mastery, defined as an openness to question one's own perspectives – the mental models that frame one's understanding of how the world works as a starting point for learning. Additionally, Senge's work introduced me to systems thinking and understanding the integrated wholeness of organizations. This perspective was reinforced by my studies of Neurolinguistic Programming and Neuro-Semantics, which provided a rich model of understanding human communications and the way in which we construct our mental maps of the territory. A key learning for me was the principle that "the person with the most flexibility exercises the most influence on the system" (Bodenhamer and Hall 1999, p. 81). This principle reinforced the importance of self mastery, driving the point that the person who exercises the greatest mastery over their own behavior and attitudes is able to exercise the most influence with others. Quinn (2000) also supported this notion by emphasizing that transformational change occurs when we choose to change ourselves – often by choosing behavior that is self sacrificing in nature. I made the commitment to learn to be the difference I want to see in the world, and develop my personal flexibility within the corporate system.

I found this conscious decision to be freeing and challenging at the same time. Freeing in that I found myself liberated from a sense of self that derived value from titles, and power roles (I realized in my changing role, that I had part of my self-identity in the work context was tied to having employee relationships). This commitment was also challenging as I began to explore the process of leadership outside the mainstream hierarchical power structure that could mandate action through positional authority. As an independent contributor I found myself free to lead in a variety of ways, emphasizing the importance of influence in the contexts that I was called to serve in.

I also mentally stepped back from the situation and began to look at the business, its internal and external stakeholders, and the parent corporation as an interwoven system of relationships that in many ways behaved as a living organism. From time to time I would go out to a hill on

the property that overlooked the corporate offices. I would envision the ebb and flow of people as they moved about their work, the processes of various departments that enabled this organism to be successful. I also realized that it was a lack of attentiveness to the signs of *dis*-ease in the organization that most often resulted in a flurry of activity when minor symptoms evolved into major problems. I recognized that an aspect of leadership is to discern this ebb and flow of the organization and identify the systemic pain points proactively – early enough so that adequate time is available to resolve the pain points *before* they become serious.

The challenge I noted was that pain measures the threshold for attention in light of competing demands. Very often key issues remain untouched solely because the situations have not reached the pain point necessary to capture adequate attention. Part of this appeared to be an issue of prioritization; part an issue of prevailing beliefs (operating as a perceptual filter) within the culture that influence what employees attend to. Busyness and firefighting were perceived as good customer service and rewarded, rather than finding ways to proactively reduce the impact to effectiveness and efficiency of employees and the customer experience through better process. In this I recognized that assessing *organizational readiness* – the ability to see and overcome limiting beliefs to engage in self-transcending construction2 – was a critical skill of leadership. The leader who can recognize the thresholds of organizational readiness is able to proactively choose when or when not to act for best advantage. It is not enough for a leader to take action; the leader must also discern when to take action so that the influence will have best effect.

Leadership as Enacting an Emerging Future

A core belief I have held about leadership is that the leader is one who sees a potential future and sets in motion actions that move those involved toward that vision. Over the years I have found that my time horizon (based on the work I was tasked to do) has provided a fairly accurate view of emerging future 3-5 years out, and I have felt a strong pull to take action as a means of preparation for meeting that future vision. Frequently that takes the form of recognizing the gaps between the resources required to operate in that future state and actions needed to close the gap. The leadership challenge comes in being able to express this vision when others may not have the capability to think that far out into the future or agree to what that future should be and what it will take to create it.

Graduate studies have expanded my understanding of this dynamic through the lens of adult development and Jaques's model of Requisite Organization (2004). Post formal adult development focuses on the capability of an individual to conceptually embrace complexity. There are many models for this type of development and for purposes of this paper I am limiting myself to Jaques's articulation of mental capacity. Jaques noted that mental capacity for complexity correlated with one's ability to complete work n-years into the future; the longer the duration of the task assigned the greater the complexity of the work and mental processing required to complete it. The leadership process then needs to account for contextualizing that future vision in time spans that have relevance to each person in the organization. This is not just

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2 Self transcending construction is a term proposed by Goldstein (2008) as a preferred description for emergent phenomena within human organizations. Emergent behavior essentially provides an opportunity for a developmental shift in ways of thinking, being and acting within a specific context.

a senior executive speaking about corporate vision. According to Jaques, aligning individual contribution to shared vision is a leadership practice that each manager is accountable for. In this regard, shared vision is a distributed process that occurs at all levels of the organization, which then is able to align individual action with short and long-term goals.

Disequilibrium

Disequilibrium is an important state in the dynamics of an organization; it is the point at which the possibility for self transcending construction of novel approaches to specific challenges is most likely to occur. It is in the pressures associated with disequilibrium that the pain thresholds reach a critical point that opens an organization to be more receptive to emerging possibilities. Yet there is a difference in the role that leadership plays in such states. In a catastrophic situation (such as the transition period when business operations were shut down as previously described), the immediate role of leadership is to make sense of the situation and address the emotional unraveling in morale. I was one of the senior leaders called upon to speak to the employees immediately after the announcement that the company was to be closed. After months of talk of the positive benefits of the merger, one hundred and fifty people were essentially told that they were losing their jobs – a third of them, that very day! I invited everyone to come together into a tight circle, acknowledged that there had been a death in the family but now we knew where we all stood. I also was able to pass out a booklet to each employee on dealing with consequences of a merger. I had arranged for these booklets without knowledge of what the outcome of the merger would bring. In discussions with employees after that meeting, I received validation for the value of the discussion in bringing a shared sense of acceptance to the reality we faced; they also commented that the booklet brought a tangible sense of being cared for in the process.

There is a paradoxical dynamic to disequilibrium states. Frequently it is the acute sense of pain experienced during these states that invites an openness to change and new ways of seeing that enable self-transcending construction. A disequilibrium state can also have the converse effect resulting in a resistance to change. In my experience, the challenge of leadership is the ability to proactively anticipate and influence change *before* the disequilibrium state becomes acute. My own sense of ambiguity served as a motivator to purchase the "merger transition" booklets prior to the finalization of the merger (I had intuited that the outcome may not be as favorable as had originally been voiced by management). Since organizations operate as complex adaptive systems, the dynamics that lead to disequilibrium typically exist as symptoms which can be observed and responded to long before the problem becomes critical. In this regard, the process of (proactive) leadership has a self regulating effect in the organization by enabling the process of self-transcending construction.

Leadership as a Process

Through my experiences I continue to see leadership as an ongoing process that occurs in human organizations through the interplay of formal and informal relationships. Leadership as a process is embodied by actors who choose to respond to a situation. Formally, the leadership process is exercised through hierarchical structures of management. While the function of management is different from that of leadership, I ascribe to the principle espoused by Jaques

that management is accountable for leadership practices to align their subordinates with the vision of the enterprise.3 Jaques's Management Accountability Hierarchy (MAH) is also structured to account for adult developmental factors – a manager is developmentally one stratum (as defined by ability to deal with work of a specific level of complexity) higher than their subordinates. Consequently, the manager should be able to bring more complex thinking to problems that a subordinate may face, and in so doing bring value to understanding the work. Likewise, the subordinate is accountable for sharing insights about the work with his/her manager who can pass on trends and insights further up the ladder. Jaques's model for administrative leadership through the formal hierarchy of management creates a bidirectional feedback loop that maintains good intelligence moving through the organization. This operates as the core nervous system and means by which work and decisions flow through the organization. Put succinctly, *effective* leadership is directly impacted by the organizational structure of the enterprise and the ability of the system to coordinate the developmental capabilities of employees into their work and communications flow. This has been a great awakening for me. Whatever skills I may have in enacting leadership may be compromised by ineffective structure in the system as a whole. In fact, I attribute the lack of a requisite organizational structure as one if not the major impediments to organizational ineffectiveness within my prior work environment.

Leadership as a State of Mind

Lastly, I have come to see leadership as a state of mind. This draws initially from the work of Robert Quinn (2004), which suggests that there are certain states that serve as attractors for the actor to take action that would be viewed as leadership in a given context. The Fundamental State of Leadership (FSL) creates the internal context that inspires the actor to respond and is reflected in four interrelated attitudes, which Quinn contrasts with opposing attitudes reflecting the "normal state." These are summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Comparison of Normal State and Fundamental State of Leadership

Normal State	Fundamental State of Leadership (FSL)
Comfort-Centered: Desire to maintain equilibrium and consistency in life experience.	**Purpose-Centered**: Alignment with a purpose greater than self. Willingness to face challenges – to move outside one's comfort zone – in order to achieve the desired outcome.
Internally Closed: Self-preservation sets strong boundaries to external influences that would disrupt internal equilibrium	**Externally Open:** Takes on an attitude of curiosity and exploration in discovering what lies outside the comfort zone. Interprets experience as feedback to better align with purpose.
Self-Focused: Ego driven, puts self interest before the interests of others in a given context	**Other-Focused:** Willing to set aside personal needs for the sake of accomplishing the desired outcome and betterment of others before self
Externally Directed: Sensitive to the impressions of others; will conform behavior in order to ensure acceptance	**Internally Directed:** Personal accountability to be integrally aligned with purpose; self-confident and willing to act regardless of the opinions of others

Source: Adapted from Quinn, 2004, p.18-25.

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3 Jaques defines 10 distinct leadership practices.

There are several implications to this model. First, that leadership has less to do with formal position and more to openness to the internal attractors that dispose the actor to perceive and respond to emerging phenomenon.4

The FSL serves two functions: first by creating an attractor that encourages active behavior that serves the greater good of the organization. Second it opens the actor to be more consciously aware of his/her perceptions and patterns of behavior. In this, the FSL represents a framework of attitudes that encourage post formal thinking – a more self-directed attitude.

I have seen this played out in my own experience. In the first three years of my tenure with my employer, I was very aware of the need for a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system to better serve the organization and needs of its customers. My recommendation met substantial resistance with management as a prior attempt to put in a CRM system had been unsuccessful.5 I was persistent in expressing this need – to the point that my manager told me that if I brought it up again I would be excluded from management meetings. And then the day came when he wanted a current client list and discovered that our current systems could not produce an accurate list. Suddenly putting in a new system became a priority… three years after the original recommendation. In a similar vein, as I transitioned to a role in the parent company, I conducted research, which led me to an awareness of the value of e-business and relevance for the ongoing growth of the company. I became a passionate advocate of e-business and presented numerous proposals to senior executives. My recommendations were not embraced, largely because senior executives did not believe that it was a viable tool within the industry. Ironically, 6 years later there is renewed interest in expanding e-business for the company.

These experiences reinforced for me a primary principle that the process of leadership is initiated as an actor (regardless of formal or informal authority) recognizes a particular need and chooses to take action, even in the face of obstacles. This reflects an alignment with the core attitudes described in the FSL.

I close with a case study where I consciously experienced the FSL in exercising leadership. I participated in a voluntary cross-functional team seeking to improve employee work experience. With gas prices on the rise, there was a strong interest in developing a strategy for telecommuting. Several solutions were suggested and were immediately shot down by the representative from IT as either being too costly, too time consuming for IT staff, or too risky from a company security perspective.6 During the conversation I was struck by the possibility of

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4 I do not dismiss the importance and significance of formal leadership structures; rather I am noting that leadership fundamentally operates as an internal response to attractors that enable self transcending construction as a response to a perceived reality. Within organizations, the interplay of actors taking action to lead in formal or informal capacities is dynamic and complex and beyond the scope of this discussion.

5 Customer Relationship Management systems typically require a high level of coordination and voluntary participation of employees to be successful. Historically, a high failure rate has typically been associated to implementation of these systems in the industry.

6 Note that this description is not intended to reflect negatively on the behavior of the IT representative. As an individual caught in the webs of larger meaning – coordination of the myriad of service requests from multiple functional departments with limited resources in staff and dollars can instill a mindset that

using a specific technology that had not been discussed. In spite of obvious resistance from IT to offer a solution, I chose to do my own research7 and discovered that a technology that had been discussed seemed to offer a reasonable compromise on low cost, minimal IT support, and strong enterprise security. I went back to the committee with a proposal to pursue this option. I then went through a series of "gauntlets" to get the software approved for testing by IT, engaging in a pilot (which proved highly successful), and then working with IT and HR to define a process for rolling out the program.

Several things struck me as I experienced myself going through this process. I felt "pulled" to conduct the research, and also made a *conscious* decision to prepare the proposal and push this through to completion, in spite of recognized resistance from some of the IT resources. This was not a project that was part of my normal work assignment, and I could have let go of the idea. Yet the inner states that focused on serving the greater good, and seeing the opportunity that this solution could provide served as an attractor to persevere through the resistance and ultimately lead to a successful result. Had I chosen to stay within my comfort zone, the new process and organizational dynamics would not have emerged.

I've touched on a number of aspects of the leadership process, which I have gleaned through my work experience. In summary, I have come to see leadership as a dynamic process that occurs in human organizations as actors perceive emerging possibilities and choose to take action. The willingness to do so is strongly connected to the actor's internal states, and engagement of the Fundamental State of Leadership. Finally, the effectiveness of the actor may be impacted by the actor's sphere of influence and by his/her formal or informal status and authority to act, and organizational readiness to embrace the change. I look forward to further develop these understandings as I continue my graduate studies.

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favors self-preservation rather than innovation. Part of the leadership journey is recognizing the frame of reference from which others are operating, and learning to work with those frames.

7 Note that choosing to do that research was not overstepping lines of authority. In my role at that time, I was heavily involved in developing strategies that involved technology solutions from the business side. I coordinated those projects with IT resources for implementation.

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R. Scott Pochron *is President of Bridge Catalyst – a business coaching and consulting organization specializing in leadership development and complexity. Over the course of his career he has worked as a CPA, technology consultant, Chief Information Officer, and business strategist in multinational companies. He is a Certified Coach through the Meta Coach Foundation. Mr. Pochron holds a degree in French and Transcultural Studies from Lake Forest College. He is currently pursuing graduate studies in Leadership and Complexity at Antioch University McGregor. He lives in Cincinnati, OH with his wife and two daughters. He can be reached at scottpochron@bridgecatalyst.com. Follow him on Twitter at www.twitter.com/bridgecatalyst.*